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Eurocentrism and the History of Democracy¹

Benjamin Isakhan

1. Introduction

In *Setting the People Free: The Story of Democracy* John Dunn opens with a brief account of the history of democracy, arguing that it can be understood as

“the story of a word of casual origins, and with a long and often ignominious history behind it, which has come quite recently to dominate the world’s political imagination ... [Democracy] began as an improvised remedy for a very local Greek difficulty two and a half thousand years ago, flourished briefly but scintillatingly, and then faded away almost everywhere for all but two thousand years. It ... came back to life as a real modern political option ... in the struggle for American independence and with the founding of the new American republic. It ... then returned, almost immediately ... if far more erratically, amid the struggles of France’s Revolution. It ... [had a] slow but insistent rise over the next century and a half, and ... triumph[ed] in the years since 1945... Within the last three-quarters of a century democracy has become the political core of the civilization which the West offers to the rest of the world.” (Dunn 2005: 13-4)

Dunn is certainly not alone in proffering what has been referred to as the ‘standard history of democracy’ (Isakhan and Stockwell 2012 [2011]-a: 4-10). In the view of Dunn and those of his ilk, democracy has a clear trajectory that can be traced from ancient experiments with participatory government in Greece and to a lesser extent in Rome, through the development of the British parliament, the American Declaration of Independence and the French Revolution, and then finally onto the triumphant march of the liberal model of democracy across the globe over the last 200 years, particularly under Western tutelage.

While there can be no denying the fact that each of these epochs have made an important contribution to our understanding of democracy and have had a profound impact on our understanding of associated concepts such as human rights, justice, liberty, personal freedoms and minority representation, they do not tell the whole story. Histories of democracy that focus exclusively on these events not only privilege Europe and her successful colonies, but also miss the broader hu-

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man story of the struggle for and achievement of democracy. Nonetheless, this 'standard history of democracy' has achieved the status of received wisdom: it is taught in classrooms across the globe, it is endlessly recycled in the news media, it forms the plot of epic novels and Hollywood blockbusters and it informs much of the policy-making that governs the world in which we live.

Thankfully, in recent years a counter-narrative has emerged which has sought to break down the intellectual orthodoxy that underpins this traditional Eurocentric story by bringing to the surface some of the lesser known histories of democracy, thereby opening up debate and discourse on the complex origins and multiple trajectories of this sophisticated form of government (Goody 2006; Hobson 2004; Isakhan 2012; Isakhan and Stockwell 2012 [2011]-b, 2015 [2012]; Markoff 1999; Markoff and Herrera 2014; Muhlberger and Paine 1993; Sadiki 2004; Sen 1999, 2003). A key contribution to the intellectual foundations of this work can be found in the writing of Fred Dallmayr (Dallmayr 1996, 2010). In his *Border Crossings: Toward a Comparative Political Theory*, Dallmayr argues that

"As practiced in most Western universities, the study of political theory or philosophy involves basically the rehearsal of the 'canon' of Western political thought from Plato to Marx... what is most dubious about these models or approaches is their unabashed derivation from key features of modern Western politics, including the structures of the secular nation-state with its accent on proceduralism, separated powers, and the bifurcation of public and private domains... Properly pursued, comparative political theorizing would need to be genuinely global in character, by ranging from Europe and the Americas to Africa, Asia and Australasia." (Dallmayr 1999: 2)

Most recently, the theme of exploring the broader and deeper history of democracy has formed the central impetus of John Keane's magnum opus, *The Life and Death of Democracy*. Here, Keane asks important questions about democracy's origins, its gradual spread and its uncertain future, arguing that such work has been:

"spurred on by deep dissatisfaction with the parochialism of much contemporary writing about democracy. Despite many rich insights, the standard works on democracy make it seem as if its languages, institutions and ideals are still essentially phenomena of the Atlantic region... [What is needed instead is] a world history of democracy, one that is no longer conceived within the confines of national and linguistic boundaries." (Keane 2009: 880)

Building atop these earlier works, this article offers a fresh critique of the work of Dunn and other political scientists and historians who have propagated the Eurocentric history of democracy. The paper argues that such work can be dissected and critiqued along several key lines: their reliance on a distinctly patriarchal discourse riddled with prejudices; the assertion that one can understand the history of democracy via the etymology of the word itself; and the deeply Eurocentric roots of the study of democracy's past embedded in the canon of Western political thought. The paper concludes by calling on contemporary political scientists and political historians concerned with the history of democracy to be careful in re-iterating this deeply flawed history of democracy and to instead work

towards a history of democracy that retrieves the silenced histories and the forgotten democratic moments that lay behind the roar of Western power.

2. Some Fundamental Problems with the ‘Standard History of Democracy’

To begin our critique of Dunn’s brief history of democracy we should acknowledge three immediate problems. The first and perhaps most obvious is that the bulk of the historical periods Dunn refers to are filled with people who despised democracy. It ought to be remembered that *demokratia* was very unpopular among prominent Greek scholars such as Plato, Aristotle, Isocrates (in his later works), Thucydides, Xenophon and ‘The Old Oligarch’ [Pseudo-Xenophon]. Generally speaking, they viewed democracy as a bad example of government, in which the brutish will of the masses usurps the natural position of the wealthy and well-educated elite (Isakhan 2012 [2011]: 19f., 2015 [2012]: 5). Many centuries later, as democracy gradually emerged as a real political option across Europe and North America, scholars such as Thomas Hobbes, Louis de Bonald and James Madison parroted the Grecian concern that democracy would undermine the authority of the aristocracy and give rise to mob rule (Bonald 2004 [1818]; Hobbes 2002 [1651]; Madison 1981 [1788]). There is no small irony in the fact that much of the historical canon that concerns democracy – from classical Grecian philosophers to the Founding Fathers of the United States – comes from those who expressed grave concerns about democracy and argued strongly in favour of other forms of government.

A second key problem evident in Dunn’s account of the history of democracy is that within this history virtually every attempt to define, understand and critique ‘democracy’ has occurred within a small circle of largely white, wealthy Anglo-American men, mostly from the elite class of their respective societies (Sadiki 2004: 6). The history of democracy is therefore underpinned by a narrative that is enmeshed within a broader patriarchal and elitist tradition. The exclusion of large swathes of the population from the historical narrative that underpins democracy is itself very undemocratic. An ideal history of democracy would be broad enough to include the diverse histories and experiences of women, minorities and subalterns who have lived under one type or another of democracy.

Perhaps because of this elite patriarchal lineage, democracy has also almost always been underpinned by a third problem, that of exclusion. Most of the periods Dunn is referring to had very narrow definitions of what constituted the citizen body. Few if any of his historical examples would pass modern criteria for a democracy simply because they so actively excluded people from the political process. As just two quick examples, participation in the Athenian assembly was limited by five defining characteristics: age (adult), gender (male), ancestry (Athenian), military service (completed military training) and birth (free-born people only, not slaves or children of slaves). As a second example, it ought to be remembered that, from its inception, US democracy marginalised large swathes of the population – women, slaves, other minorities, and so on. While the hard won battles of various civil rights movements throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have gradually expanded the parameters of citizenship, modern democ-

racies still confront wide disparities and inequalities. This is evident during the election cycle where, even in advanced democracies like the United States, voter turnout rarely gets above 60% with empirical evidence suggesting that the US states with greater racial diversity also have weaker political institutions, more barriers to mass participation and therefore lower aggregate voter turnout (Hill and Leighley 1999).

Dunn's brief account of the history of democracy is therefore deeply problematic. Each of the periods he touches on were filled with elite critics of democracy, were riven with exclusions and prejudices and were enveloped within a distinctly Anglo-American patriarchal discourse.

3. A Democracy by any other name...?

However, Dunn's brief account of the history of democracy also presents us with two far more substantive problems that need to be addressed. The first is that throughout his book, Dunn frequently equates the history of democracy with the history of the word itself (see for example: Dunn 2005: 23-4). While it is certainly true that the word *demokratia* was invented in ancient Greece and came into Late Latin before being adapted to the French word *democratie* in the sixteenth century and the modern English word democracy in more recent times, a similar trajectory can be traced for many ancient Greek words that remain in common parlance today.

Let us consider a couple of parallel examples. The Greek word 'philosophy' has a similar etymology to democracy and yet today we readily acknowledge that, for example, the ancient Chinese or medieval Arabs practised and contributed greatly to the discipline of philosophy even though we understand that they may not have used a Greek word to describe their most profound cogitations. Similarly, the etymology of the Greek word 'astronomy' parallels that of democracy, but no genuine history of astronomy is complete without some acknowledgement of the contributions of ancient Mesopotamia or medieval India again with the implicit understanding that they may not have used the Greek word 'astronomy' to document their observations of celestial mechanics.

What these examples demonstrate is that the etymology of a word is not equivalent to its history as a practise. By focusing on the use of the word 'democracy' we therefore miss the fact that many of the people who have practiced or lived under or fought for democracy have not used the Greek-derived word 'democracy' to describe their government. It is little wonder that ancient Assyrians or Israelites, medieval Muslims or Scandinavians, or pre-colonial Africans or Maoris did not use a Greek word to describe their best governmental arrangements. This does not mean that these people did not practise democracy, only that they did not use the word (Isakhan 2015 [2012]: 8-12).

An insistence on understanding the history of democracy via the use of the word itself also means that because this word has not been used in other linguistic traditions to describe their models of inclusive governance, the practice of democracy can be dismissed as being foreign to their respective history and culture. This is just as true for the leaders of the Chinese Communist Party, some of

whom have argued that China's culture and history are incompatible with democracy (Bristow 2011) as it is for hard-line Islamists who argue that there is no democracy in Islam and that 'democracy' is a foreign concept to the Muslim world (CNN 2005). Such people rest much of their argument on the fact that no historical Chinese or Islamic government has ever described itself using the word 'democracy' – but failing to use the word doesn't necessarily mean that they have also failed to approximate the practise of democracy.

There is an additional problem with Dunn's twinning of history and etymology when it comes to democracy. If we were to insist on only including those who use the word 'democracy' to describe their governmental arrangements before they can be included in the history of democracy, then we are forced to include some very un-democratic regimes. As an example, Saddam Hussein frequently referred to himself as the 'shepherd of democracy' and claimed to be creating a democracy compatible with Arab and Iraqi culture (Isakhan 2012: 105-109). In a similar vein, one would hardly want to include the old (East) German Democratic Republic of the second half of the twentieth century or today's Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea) and the Democratic Republic of the Congo among the pantheon of democracies. An insistence on the use of the word 'democracy' to be included in its history therefore overlooks the fact that many who had never heard the word lived up to its key principles while several who call themselves democrats fall well short of its minimum criteria (Isakhan and Stockwell 2012 [2011]-c: 221f). In assessing the depth and breadth of democracy's past, it is important to focus on the approximation of best practice rather than the employment of particular nomenclature to describe it.

4. The Eurocentric Roots of the 'Standard History of Democracy'

Dunn's reliance on a history of democracy that is defined by Anglo-American elitism, patriarchy, exclusion and etymology all converge to present us with perhaps the biggest single problem with his analysis, namely that it is profoundly Eurocentric. For Dunn and many like him, the history of democracy is also the history of Western civilization. Indeed, every single moment mentioned in Dunn's brief history occurred within Europe or North America. This perpetuates a very specific understanding of the nature of democracy itself where 'rule by the people' has become synonymous with those political moments and traditions of Western Europe and the United States. This presents a distinct challenge: For those whose heritage does not include a direct link to Greek assemblies, the American Congress or the French Revolution, the 'standard history of democracy' provides a distant and exclusive narrative, which limits one's ability to embrace democracy.

However, Dunn's quote is not only Eurocentric in that it insists that democracy has a uniquely Western history, but also because he argues that it forms 'the political core of the civilization which the West offers to the rest of the world' (Dunn 2005: 14). The implication here is twofold. Firstly, it implies that the rest of the world does not have a legitimate democratic history to draw upon and that the only path to democratization is via 'Westernization'. The second implication appears to be that the West has a responsibility, perhaps even an obligation, to

spread democracy to those regions of the world that do not have access to the rich democratic culture of the West. The ‘Western’ cast of Dunn’s history of democracy therefore suggests that only the ‘West’ knows democracy and that only the ‘West’ can bring democracy to the rest of the world. The problem here is that when successes have occurred in the global uptake of ‘Western’ liberal democracy, they have been seen as a sign of the merits of this model and as a vindication of European hegemony, while failures have been seen as a result of the inability of non-Europeans to grasp the complexity of democracy and of their preference for violence, disorder and autocracy.

However, it ought to be pointed out that such sentiments are far from new. The history of democracy has long been couched – sometimes unwittingly, sometimes deliberately – in a series of very old ideas about the supposed political divide between East and West. This divide relies on a distinct dualism: the West is seen as having a unique inclination towards democracy, it tolerates diversity and opposing points of view, it encourages innovation and excellence, and it supports freedom, equality and the rule of law. Paradoxically, the East is seen to be driven by impulses that give way to vice and violence, that rely on stagnant traditions and out-dated modes of culture, that limit freedom of expression, and that give rise to unimaginably cruel tyrants who rule by fear, oppression and bloodshed. These are, of course, overly simplistic ways of looking at both the political history of the Occident and the Orient. Not only do they reduce rich and complex histories to a storybook narrative, but they routinely ignore the myriad places and times in which the West itself has acted oppressively and tyrannically, while the East has practiced tolerance, cooperation and the rule of law. Repeated and recycled with little critique, this simple dualism has amounted to an intellectual orthodoxy that helps explain away complex realities: the West has a duty to spread democracy among the uncivilized ‘lesser breeds’ but the project is futile because the East is trapped in an unescapable web of barbarism and bellicosity.

The twin discourses of ‘Western democracy’ and ‘Oriental despotism’ can be traced back through the entire canon of Western political thought (Isakhan 2012: 15-36). For example, while influential Greek thinkers such as Herodotus and Aristotle are widely recognized for their contribution to the understanding and formulation of *demokratia*, they were simultaneously amongst the first to discuss the concept of despotism, which they attributed to the Orient. For his part, Aristotle tended to equate the Occident with democracy and the Orient with despotism, arguing that the people of the East were susceptible to oppression by forms of total power because:

“barbarians [non-Greeks]... [are] more servile than Hellenes, and Asiatics [are more servile] than Europeans, [they] do not rebel against a despotic government... [Their governments] have the nature of tyrannies because the people are by nature slaves; but there is no danger of their being overthrown.” (Aristotle 1943 [350 BCE]: III.14)

As a whole, the Greeks premised much of their argument about such issues on an assumption not only about their own civility and their invention of democracy,

but also about the backwardness and barbarity of non-Greeks and about their history of tyranny and oppression.

Such notions of democracy as a uniquely Western proclivity achieved renewed momentum throughout the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as discussions of representative government gradually grew across Europe and America. During this period there was an enormous intellectual effort to connect modern European experiments with democracy to those of ancient Athens, even though modern central-European Christians had little in common with the ancient pagan Greeks other than the vague notion that they were both ‘Europeans’ (Bernal [1987] 1991). A virtual consensus emerged that because democracy had succeeded among the Greeks and was being practised by the British or French, democracy and its history were inexorably tied to Western civilisation (Bryce 1921a, 1921b; Goodwin 1864; Maines 1976 [1885]; Norcross 1883). The other key consensus was that the Orient had a very different history. For many seminal European authors, Asiatic history was routinely characterized as being trapped in an inviolable web of despotism, stagnation, barbarousness, slavery, disorder, moral decay and effeminacy – characteristics that certainly prevented progress towards democracy.

One example is the early travelogue in which wealthy aristocratic British and French explorers such as Master Thomas Dallam, Sir George Courthope, Sir Jean Chardin and Jean-Baptiste Tavernier recorded their adventures (Chardin 1720 [1686]; Courthope 1907 [1616-1685]; Dallam 1893 [1599-1600]; Tavernier 1977 [1676]-a, 1977 [1676]-b). In Sir Jean Chardin’s *Travels in Persia* for example, the narrative exposes the drunken, brutal and arbitrary despotism of the Persian king through the eyes of a rational French merchant and diplomat. The king is seen to command absolute obedience to his every whim, no matter how heinous his request or how inebriated he is at the time of his demands. This is perhaps best illustrated in the relationship between the king and his Prime Minister who admits to the king ‘I am your Slave, I will ever do what your Majesty shall command me’. Despite such submission, the king repeatedly humiliates the Prime Minister in front of the court by using ill language, by striking him, by throwing wine in his face and ‘a thousand indignities of this nature’ (Chardin 1720 [1686]: 16f.). Such despotism was reported back to Europe as indicative of the Persian – and by implication, Eastern – model of governance, a model of drunken cruelty that would have contrasted sharply with the apparent civility of Europe at the time (Grossrichard 1998 [1979]).

Drawing heavily on Chardin’s accounts of Oriental despotism, French philosopher Charles Louis Montesquieu attempted to illustrate that autocracy benefited no one by using Persia as the model despotic empire which he viewed as representative of a broader Oriental despotism that pervaded all aspects of Asiatic life (Montesquieu 1923 [1721]). In *The Spirit of the Laws* Montesquieu claimed that climate and geography predisposed certain regions to particular political systems. In vast, hot lands Montesquieu argued, the ‘effeminacy of the people ... has almost always rendered them slaves’. ‘This,’ Montesquieu continues, ‘is the grand reason of the weakness of Asia, and of the strength of Europe; of the liberty of Europe, and of the slavery of Asia ... Hence it proceeds that liberty in Asia never

increases; whilst in Europe it is enlarged or diminished, according to particular circumstances'. This line of reasoning leads Montesquieu to the conclusion that 'Power in Asia ought, then, to be always despotic,' because, 'it is impossible to find in all the histories of that country [Asia] a single passage which discovers a freedom of the spirit' (Montesquieu 1949 [1748]: 264, 266, 269).

The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries witnessed not only the series of events and upheavals across Europe and the United States that were to pave the way for modern representative democracy, but also saw the cementation of familiar stereotypes regarding the Oriental 'other' into a series of received wisdoms that were frequently drawn upon without scrutiny or independent research (Bhabha 1990; Said 2003 [1978]). This is evident in the works of influential scholars such as the German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel who developed a Eurocentric approach to world history in which the Asiatic civilizations that had once contributed to the narrative of human history, now lay at its periphery (Bernal 1991 [1987]: 294ff.; Gran 1996: 2f.). While Hegel is considerably more generous to the kingdoms of the Near East than he is to those of the Far East, this is only because 'They are related to the West, while the Far Eastern peoples are perfectly isolated' (Hegel 1952 [1837]: 235). In discussing the Persian Empire he argues that its success was enabled by its ability to quell the natural barbarousness of the people. He argues that

"It was not given to the Asiatics to unite self-dependence, freedom, and substantial vigour of mind, with culture, *i.e.*, an interest for diverse pursuits and an acquaintance with the conveniences of life. Military valour among them is consistent only with barbarity of manners. It is not the calm courage of order; and when their mind opens to a sympathy with various interests, it immediately passes into effeminacy; allows its energies to sink, and makes men slaves of an enervated sensuality." (Hegel 1952 [1837]: 242)

Such sentiments are also evident in the works of James Mill who had never been to India but was nonetheless employed by the English-owned East India Company to pen the six volume *The History of British India*. Throughout this classically reductive text, Mill seeks to justify the actions of both the Company and the Crown by relying on pejorative assumptions and racist ideologies (Inden 1990; Majeed 1992). Throughout his works, Mill (the father of the famous political theorist John Stuart Mill) reiterates the notion of Oriental despotism as he imagined it to be in India, claiming that

"Among the Hindus, according to the Asiatic model, the government was monarchical, and, with the usual exception of religion and its ministers, absolute. No idea of any system of rule, different from the will of a single person, appears to have entered the minds of them, or their legislators." (Mill 1972 [1817]: 212f.)

These ideas are also present in Alexis de Tocqueville's writings on the French occupation of Algeria. While Tocqueville was so generous in his appraisal of Democracy in America (Tocqueville 1864 [1835]) and so certain that it would continue to flourish there, he was equally as certain that, despite the best efforts of the French to civilize the Algerians, Arabs would never overcome their penchant

for violence and tyranny. For Tocqueville, the Arabs were not only difficult to govern, they were unable to govern themselves and were unlikely to ever develop anything akin to democracy. In one particularly revealing passage of *Writings on Empire and Slavery*, Tocqueville writes

“that for quite a long time – we cannot know how long – domination of the Arabs will be onerous. This is because of the social organization of this people, their tribal organization and nomadic life, something we can do nothing about for a very long time, perhaps ever. Very small, nomadic societies require great effort and expense to be held in an order that will always be imperfect. And this great governmental effort produces very little, because the same causes that make them so difficult to govern also make them poor, needing little and producing little.” (Tocqueville 2001 [1841]: 62)

Similarly, Karl Marx also inherited notions of Oriental despotism and the Asian propensity for stationariness. Overall, Marx tended to view the Orient through a series of stagnations or absences – those of civil society, bourgeoisie culture, private property, propensity for social change and modernization. Central to Marx’s understanding of the Orient was his formulation of what came to be termed the ‘Asiatic Mode of Production’ in which Asia was stifled by the constant dynastic change and the centralized ownership of property and production. The people were reduced to being the slaves of their despotic ruler, forced into menial labour and thereby unable to form civil movements or become upwardly mobile (Sawer 1977; Turner 1978). He further believed that the only route for Asian salvation was for the Orient to undergo ‘Europeanization’ (Avineri 1968; Turner 1978).

By the turn of the twentieth century the familiar tropes and stereotypes regarding the Oriental ‘other’ had by now received the status of received wisdom and were drawn upon without scrutiny or independent research. As one example, the German political economist Max Weber began his work on the sociology of religion by writing *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Following Hegel and relying mostly on secondary Orientalist sources, Weber argued that religion had played a pivotal role in the unique development of Western capitalist society and, simultaneously, in preventing regions such as the Orient from achieving analogous civilisational heights. He claimed that while Protestantism required believers to strive towards salvation, Asiatic religions such as Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam encouraged the faithful to accept the world as it is. Weber believed that the religious dichotomy between East and West had a profound effect on the realms of politics and law, arguing that

“all Indian political thought was lacking in a systematic method comparable to that of Aristotle, and, indeed, in the possession of rational concepts. Not all the anticipations in India (School of Mimamsa), nor the extensive codification especially in the Near East, nor all the Indian and other books of law, had the strictly systematic forms of thought, so essential to a rational jurisprudence, of the Roman law and of the Western law under its influence. A structure like the canon law is known only to the West.” (Weber 1992 [1904-5]: 14)

More specifically, Weber viewed Islam as a religion guided by ‘patrimonial instability (or ‘Sultanism’)’ (Turner 1994: 29) which thereby disabled the *Ummah* (the Islamic community) from successfully challenging the political order and instigating social change (Turner 1974). Despite the fact that Weber spent much of his life writing about Oriental cultures and religions, he rarely bothered to challenge his erroneous assumptions regarding the superiority of the West over the East. Perhaps even more problematic is the fact that his work went on to have a profound impact on European scholarship of Islam where, at least until very recently, ‘the great majority of studies of social movements in Islamic societies tended (either implicitly or explicitly) to be situated within the Weberian tradition’ (Burke 1988: 20).

Together, scholars such as Montesquieu, Hegel, Mill, Tocqueville, Marx and Weber contributed much to the modern world’s understanding of the benefits and pitfalls of representative democracy. They were also certain that, while Europe had a unique proclivity for democracy, the non-Europeans – Persians, Indians and Arabs; Hindu’s, Muslims and Buddhists – were destined to stagnate under oppressive forms of governance. To say that this legacy has had an impact on perceptions of democracy and its history today would be a massive understatement. So pervasive is the dialectic between ‘Western democracy’ and ‘Oriental despotism’ that it has been cited by various ‘enemies’ of democracy – tyrants and fundamentalists, pejorative policy pundits and politicians, and racist journalists and academics – who use it to argue that certain peoples, or certain regions, simply do not have the requisite historical or cultural background to practise democracy successfully.

To argue, however, that such notions are isolated to the works of nineteenth and early twentieth century scholars is to profoundly underestimate the pervasiveness of this discourse (Isakhan 2010). As democracy spread under US tutelage after WWII and the Cold War, it continued to be seen as most at home in the Western world or in places most heavily influenced by it, with Anglo-Saxon Protestantism held up as the cultural or religious tradition most conducive to democracy (Almond and Verba 1989 [1963]). To cite one very well-known example, political scientist Samuel P. Huntington has dedicated much of his work to arguing that each region of the globe has its own individual religio-cultural essence, which plays a large part in determining that region’s receptivity to democratic systems (Huntington 1984). For example he labels Islam and Confucianism ‘profoundly anti-democratic’, claiming that they were incompatible with democratic norms and would therefore ‘impede the spread of democratic norms in society, deny legitimacy to democratic institutions, and thus greatly complicate if not prevent the emergence and effectiveness of those institutions’ (Huntington 1991: 298, 300). Such views are not only Euro-centric and overtly racist, they are also alarming in their historical inaccuracy.

Following in this vein, through the 1990s and into the new millennium scores of books have been written by political scientists and political historians purporting to document the history of democracy. Overwhelmingly, these works fail to challenge this intellectual orthodoxy, instead preferring to recycle the Eurocentric narrative drawing on familiar sources and widely held presuppositions about

what democracy is and about its origins (Arblaster 2002 [1987]; Dahl 1998; Dunn 1992; Lakoff 1996; Roper 2013; Stromberg 1996). Instead of confronting new truths, illuminating dark corners or following difficult directions, they seem largely content to recycle the familiar and satisfying story with which we are all familiar. To give a couple of brief examples, in his *Democracy: A History of Ideas* Boris DeWiel simply asserts that ‘The culture of democracy, sometimes called Western civilization or simply the West, began about three millennia ago’ before he begins his typically Eurocentric account of the history of democracy (DeWiel 2000: 9). More recently, in his *Of the People, By the People: A New History of Democracy*, Roger Osborne claims that democracy is a ‘Western invention’ that

“began in the crowded marketplaces of ancient Athens and Rome... [continued at] a church hall in Putney where common soldiers... argued for the right of every man to have a say in government. Across the Atlantic we see how the practice of democracy came to America... [onto] the French Revolution [which] combined a passionate belief in equality and democracy with political violence... [And then] In 1989 European communism collapsed, leaving a world in which democracy became the passport to membership of the international community.” (Osborne 2012: 2ff.)

5. Conclusion

The history of democracy as described by the bulk of contemporary political scientists and political historians is therefore profoundly flawed for several key reasons. Firstly, it is dominated by periods in which most prominent intellectuals were critics of democracy, periods in which the bulk of the population were excluded from the practice of politics, and periods underpinned by discourses of elite hegemony and Anglo-American male dominance. Secondly, the history of democracy is often mistakenly aligned with the etymology of the word itself, obfuscating those histories in which people may have approximated the practise of democracy but did not use a Greek word to describe their political arrangements. Finally, and perhaps most problematically, for most who claim to study the history of democracy, it is seen as synonymous with the keystone moments of Western civilization.

This paper therefore offers an ambitious critique of those who are or have been content to reiterate the ‘standard history of democracy’. It has documented the deep roots of this typically Eurocentric narrative and pointed out its inherent racism and hubris, its historical inaccuracies, and its tendency to make democracy an exclusive doctrine that has little relevance to the peoples and histories outside the Anglo-American sphere. However, as Edward Said argued shortly before his passing in 2004,

“There was never a misinterpretation that could not be revised, improved, or overturned. There was never a history that could not to some degree be recovered and compassionately understood in all its suffering and accomplishment.” (Said 2004: 22)

It is the central premise of this paper that the history of democracy has been profoundly misinterpreted and that it must be ‘revised, improved, or overturned’ and

that alternative histories of democracy must be ‘recovered and compassionately understood’ in all their ‘suffering and accomplishment’. The task therefore of contemporary political scientists and political historians concerned with the history of democracy is to carefully retrieve the silenced histories and the forgotten democratic moments that lay behind the roar of Western power.

Today, as democracy spreads out across the world, this work has never been more urgent. We need to broaden the narrative of democracy and break down the intellectual orthodoxy that democracy has exclusively Western roots. We also urgently need scholars who will carefully document forgotten histories and counter-narratives to demonstrate the extent to which democracy has been present at various times and in sometimes unfamiliar ways in the complex histories and rich cultural traditions of most of the people of the earth. We need a rich debate on the question of democracy’s history and a clear view of how alternative histories can not only be brought to light, but also how they can be used to help people all over the world to have a greater sense of ownership over democracy and take pride in practising and re-creating it for their time, for their situation and for their purposes. Finally, it must be remembered that democracy is not ‘ours’ to give to the world. It is a dynamic system of governance underpinned by virtues and practices that have legitimate ancestry in every corner and culture of the globe. Scholars, democrats and citizens alike would do well to remember this as democracy is strived for, achieved, overturned and strived for again through the twenty-first century and beyond.

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